COVID-19 Testing
Frequently Asked Questions

The medical/technical team of the Unified Health Command, which is made up of Billings Clinic, St. Vincent Healthcare, RiverStone Health and Yellowstone County Disaster and Emergency Services, has compiled this information about COVID-19 testing available in Yellowstone County.

What kind of COVID-19 tests are available?
At this time, there are 3 kinds of COVID-19 tests that have been approved by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA):

- Molecular or PCR tests, also known as RNA tests
- Rapid antigen tests
- Antibody tests

What is the difference between COVID-19 tests?
1. Molecular or PCR tests, detect genetic material specific to the virus that causes COVID-19. This test uses samples collected from your nose, throat or saliva to determine if you have active COVID-19, can infect others and should be isolated. This test is so powerful that it may also detect remaining virus after you are no longer contagious.
2. Rapid antigen tests detect proteins on the surface of the virus that causes COVID-19 and results are known within 20 minutes. Like the PCR test, samples from your nose, throat, or saliva are used to determine if you have active COVID-19 and can infect others. Use of these rapid tests is most accurate if used in the first few days of illness.
3. Antibody tests can show if you have had COVID-19. These tests are not used to diagnose active COVID-19.

Is there an accuracy concern with rapid antigen testing?
Rapid antigen tests are not as accurate as molecular/PCR tests and people who are infected with COVID-19 may have a negative test result. If your rapid antigen test result is negative, your healthcare provider may order a molecular/PCR test to confirm the results. If your rapid antigen test is positive, there is no need to confirm the result with another test.

Is there a COVID-19 test that I can buy to use at home?
At this time, there are no COVID-19 tests that can be completely used and processed at home. However, the FDA has issued emergency use authorizations (EUAs) test kits where saliva samples are taken at home and then the sample is sent to a lab for testing.

What type of test is recommended in Yellowstone County for detecting COVID-19?
The "gold standard" for detecting COVID-19 is the molecular/PCR test. While rapid antigen testing can quickly diagnose COVID-19 in someone who has symptoms, if this test is negative, you will likely need to be retested with a molecular/PCR test. There are some circumstances a rapid antigen test can be used for screening someone without symptoms. At this time, we only recommend antibody testing for people in specific circumstances with guidance from a healthcare provider.

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